



174 of 223 DOCUMENTS

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The Baltimore Sun

October 5, 2006 Thursday  
FINAL EDITION

**SECTION:** TELEGRAPH; Pg. 1A

**LENGTH:** 1250 words

**HEADLINE:** TICKET WORRIES BLACK SENATORS;  
MD. LAWMAKERS MEET WITH O'MALLEY, CARDIN ABOUT LACK OF DIVERSITY;  
SUN EXCLUSIVE;  
MARYLAND VOTES 2006

**BYLINE:** Doug Donovan, Sun reporter

**BODY:**

Worried about a lack of diversity atop the Democratic statewide ticket this fall, Maryland's African-American state senators recently met privately with Martin O'Malley and Benjamin L. Cardin to plan ways of boosting support among black voters.

The Democratic senators' suggestions ranged from asking O'Malley to pledge a diverse Cabinet if he is elected governor - including a spot for former attorney general candidate Stuart O. Simms - to demanding that Cardin consult more often with African-American leaders than Maryland's two current U.S. senators, according to state senators who attended the hourlong meetings in Annapolis.

"We have allowed ... the Republican Party to come up with the first African-American at the top of the ticket," said Sen. Joan Carter Conway of Baltimore, who attended the meetings. "The Democrats should have done something a long time ago. Hopefully we'll work toward that goal."

The private Sept. 27 meetings - including one with Maryland Democratic Party Chairman Terry Lierman - were called for shortly after the Sept. 12 primary by the state's 10 black senators, who call themselves the Committee of 10. Many say they are frustrated that both leading black candidates, Simms and Kweisi Mfume, lost in the Democratic primaries for attorney general and U.S. Senate, respectively.

The Republicans, meanwhile, are fielding Michael S. Steele for U.S. Senate. In 2002 Steele became the first African-American elected to a statewide office, as Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr.'s running mate. The Republicans hope Steele's presence will help the GOP capture some black voters while diminishing African-American turnout for

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Democrats.

O'Malley's running mate, Del. Anthony G. Brown of Prince George's County, is the only black candidate on the statewide Democratic ticket.

Some of the black senators said that during the meetings, they complained about their perception that the Maryland Democratic Party did not give Cardin and Mfume equivalent support. They believe that greater black turnout spurred by equal party treatment could have delivered a black Democratic candidate to the U.S. Senate.

A bad taste

"The response to [Mfume's] candidacy left a sour taste in our mouth," said Sen. Nathaniel J. McFadden of Baltimore.

The loss of that opportunity, several senators said, has left black voters disillusioned and vulnerable to either staying home Nov. 7 or supporting Ehrlich and Steele.

That's certainly how the Republicans view the situation.

"Given the lack of diversity on the Democratic ticket, these meetings were born of legitimate concerns about how an O'Malley/Brown administration would look," said Shareese N. DeLeaver, a spokeswoman for the Ehrlich campaign.

But McFadden said that Cardin's performance during last week's meeting reminded the senators of the congressman's commitment to diversity. When Cardin was speaker of the Maryland House of Delegates, he appointed the first black to chair a committee.

"We wanted to make sure that they have on their agendas issues that are of critical importance to the African-American community," McFadden said.

Sen. Ulysses Currie, a Prince George's Democrat, said the meetings with Cardin, O'Malley and Lierman aired many resentments that echoed party divisions of 2002, when Kathleen Kennedy Townsend picked a white former Republican as her running mate.

"We talked about how to gin up the support we need from the African-American community in Baltimore City and Prince George's County because Ehrlich is really working hard in [both places]," Currie said.

"We represent a million voters in the state," he added.

Currie said the group asked Cardin to talk with them frequently and Cardin agreed to improve communications.

Cardin spokesman Oren Shur said the meeting was "positive and productive" but declined to comment further because it was a private meeting. On Tuesday, Cardin's campaign launched a commercial airing on black radio stations in the Washington market. The ads feature Glenn F. Ivey, the black state's attorney for Prince George's County. Shur said the spots were planned weeks ago.

O'Malley was in Prince George's on Saturday and Sunday, and on Tuesday he greeted commuters at 7 a.m. at the Branch Avenue Metro stop in Suitland. But his spokesman said the mayor and Brown have consistently campaigned in the Washington area. The Prince George's County campaign office has been open for months.

Brown, who also was in last week's meeting, said he explained to the black senators everything that he and O'Malley have been doing.

"We talked about how to maximize the effort in the African-American community," Brown said. "During this

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discussion there was an interest in, 'Hey, we want to see Anthony more in the African-American community.'"

He added: "We also explained to them what my role will be in the larger broadcast media, direct mail and radio."

In the meeting with Brown and O'Malley, black senators were a bit more demanding than they were with Cardin.

"We made a strong pitch to O'Malley that we want and expect to see African-Americans on his transition team and his Cabinet," Currie said. "He has said he would do that but is avoiding specifics."

Currie also said that many in the group wanted to see Simms - who served as a Cabinet secretary under former Gov. Parris N. Glendening - land a high-profile position in an O'Malley administration. Currie said the mayor would not commit to anyone until he actually wins.

O'Malley campaign officials said the mayor has proved his commitment to diversity with 12 black officials in his City Hall Cabinet and his support of increasing city contracts awarded to black-owned companies.

"Stuart Simms is a man of remarkable integrity, a consummate professional, but no decisions have been made for positions within the administration," said O'Malley spokesman Rick Abbruzzese. "Martin O'Malley is focused on winning the election on Nov. 7."

#### Frustration

Sen. Nathaniel Exum of Prince George's County said he was frustrated with the outcome of the meetings because he felt the candidates did not commit to much of anything.

"The concern was, 'Look at the ticket,'" Exum said. "Just look at it. Same as 1856."

Exum said he is upset that the Democratic Party had not resolved many of the same issues that surfaced in 2002.

"I haven't been satisfied since four years ago for what the Democratic Party has been doing to its most loyal supporters," he said.

Lierman said he felt that his meeting was productive and that the senators expressed support for what he has been able to do to expand the party's outreach to blacks. He also noted that the Republicans have no black members in the General Assembly.

"We have unprecedented numbers of minorities statewide," Lierman said. But, he said, the state senators "have some very legitimate interests that we need to work on" related to the top of the ticket.

Sen. Delores G. Kelley, a Baltimore County Democrat, said her concern during the meeting was that African-American voters would stay home because many black state lawmakers do not have contested races in November.

"Everybody knows that turnout among a constituency that large and that loyal" is critical to the top of the ticket, Kelley said. "They're distracted in the way that the Republicans have fielded their ticket."

Conway was more blunt in her assessment.

"A lot of people feel disenfranchised about what happened during the primary," Conway said. "If someone doesn't do something in terms of uniting the party, then we're going to be in trouble."

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**GRAPHIC:** Photo(s)

State Sen. Joan Carter Conway, a Democrat who represents Baltimore, predicted trouble ahead for Maryland's Democratic Party if it fails to improve unity.

Sun photograph

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